

Wilson set the hat gently onto Wendy's small head. Her hair was soft. Her late mother must have once enjoyed sitting and brushing out the pretty yellow waves covering her head, back in a gentler world more suited to little girls...

Wilson sighed shakily and removed the hat. "Perfect fit," he mumbled.

"Delightful," she said flatly.

He tucked the little hat away into the new chest for winter things. It still smelled of sap, and his hands still had a few splinters from making it.

He thought for the first time in a long time of the little nephews and nieces and various forms of cousin that had crawled into his lap at his last Christmas family gathering- his last ever. He swallowed the lump in his throat and looked around at the others. Who were they missing?

At the moment, neither Wolfgang or Wes seemed to be missing anyone- Wolfgang was speaking happily to Wes in a language Wilson didn't recognize. Did Wes even understand it? For that matter, how well did Wes understand English? Wes was French. Maybe some of the times Wilson thought he was being cheeky, Wes just couldn't quite understand what he was saying- Wilson tended to speak quickly and use a rather sophisticated scientific vocabulary.

Wilson didn't know very much about either of them. They were nice men, and he would like to know more about who they were... but he certainly didn't want to hurt them by reminding them of their sorely missed family, and he didn't want to annoy them with too many questions. He'd find out more about them when an opportunity presented itself.

For now he'd leave them to their conversation. He started some food cooking for himself and Wendy and walked over to the chest, trying to suppress a wince-

"You are in pain," she observed.

-and evidently failing.

His legs had gotten generally scraped, bruised and somewhat bitten while fighting frogs and spiders earlier that day, and now it hurt to walk. He'd heal. "It's not serious, Wendy," he said, somewhat strained, as he arranged himself into a kneeling position to look through the things in the chest.

"I see..."

He knew she had family that she was missing. Her parents. He was less certain of what to do about it, though. Distract her?

He found what he'd been looking for in the chest- a bushel of pinecones. "Wendy... would you like to watch me burn these?"

Fire was very distracting.

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After they had their dinner he led her a safe distance away from camp to burn the pinecones.

"You are definitely limping," she said.

Wilson glanced back at her. Before, he had always been quick to assure her that he would be okay, his injuries weren't serious, et cetera. He had assumed she pointed it out because she saw adults as protector figures and did not like them to be vulnerable. However, he could no longer ignore the nagging impression that she did not look concerned when she said these things. She looked intrigued.

"My legs hurt," he said.

"I see..." She did look intrigued.

"Are you interested in the medical sciences, Wendy?"

"No..."

"Are you sure? If you're not put off by the suffering of others you could be a very effective nurse."

She looked blankly at him. "You believe I would be suited for a life of ministering tenderly to others..."

"Absolutely not. Ministering tenderly is an optional part of the profession. I've yet to meet a nurse who opted in to it."

"Is that so. Have you met many nurses?"

"One or two. I believe we're far enough out to light these now." He set the pinecones down on the ground, knelt by them and set them ablaze. He stood up and stepped back to avoid the heat.

"Such intentional destruction," said Wendy.

"I need ashes. The spiders here have a gland that produces a mild venom that's quite useful as an antiseptic. It's more effective when mixed with ash."

"Ah," said Wendy.

Wilson glanced over the burning pinecones to make sure they weren't setting anything else on fire. They shouldn't be, they were sitting on bare earth, but one never knew...

He looked up. A few yards away was the edge of a thick forest. For a brief, odd moment, he'd felt as if it was watching him.

And now he thought he heard the rustle of something leaving in a hurry.

Wilson tapped his lower lip. There WERE things that watched one, here, but they weren't human and it felt very different. This was the third time today that he thought he'd

heard, seen or sensed someone nearby. Once was a figment of the imagination. Twice was a sign that one was sleep-deprived. Three times, in the absence of fever- and his forehead was quite cool- meant he might do well to check on the archway he and Maxwell had constructed. Wilson had just assumed it was done bringing people through after the initial activation, but there was no proof of that whatsoever! Perhaps he'd been foolish not to investigate sooner.

Wendy was waving her hands in front of his eyes.

"Eh?"

"Your ash," she said. The pinecones had burned all the way down and the resulting valuable salve ingredients needed to be gathered up before they blew away. Wilson got to work.

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"Ahem! Wolfgang!"

Wolfgang waved to him. "Tiny man! Where did you go?"

"Just over there a ways-

"Went to poop?"

"No! No, I was burning some pinecones for ashes to make salves." He showed Wolfgang the shallow rock-dish that contained the precious medicine.

Wolfgang nodded. "For teeny broken legs?"

"No, not- this is for your knuckles. Give me your hand." He sat next to Wolfgang, balanced the salve container in his lap, and took hold of one of Wolfgang's massive hands. The knuckles had suffered a great deal more damage than he'd seen previously, which

could mean only one thing. "You were punching more boulders, weren't you? After I asked you not to?"

"Is fun and good exercise!"

"You'll break your hand. And my heart. But that's fine. It's your hand," Wilson said briefly. He dipped his fingers into the salve and liberally coated the bleeding knuckles. He glanced up and noticed Wendy watching. See, she did have an interest in the medical sciences. He'd have to do his best to encourage it.

"Mm! Stings like vodka," said Wolfgang.

Wilson wrapped up Wolfgang's hand to keep the salve in the wound.

"Boxing wrap," said Wolfgang.

"This is not an invitation to punch anything else! Did you do anything to your other hand?"

Wolfgang proved to be an ambidextrous rock-puncher. Wilson shook his head silently and treated the other hand.

"Need help with boo-boos on little legs?" Wolfgang asked.

"Who, me? No, that's... quite alright." Wilson bent over and tugged down the cuffs of his pants to obscure the bruising on his ankles. It looked a lot worse than it was.

"Physician, heal thyself," Wendy said.

"I don't need to waste salves on this."

"Do you think you deserve pain, Wilson?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Why do you not treat your own wounds?" she asked.

"Because it would be a waste of salve, because it's a superficial injury!" That salve stung like nobody's business, too, so if he did think he deserved pain, he would apply some posthaste. "All I need is rest." It was getting dark now. "Has Wes already gone to bed?"

Wolfgang nodded.

"Let's all do the same, then. Good night..." Perhaps tomorrow morning he could wake up before the others, and check on the portal without involving or worrying them.

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It was awfully bright, and stuffy inside the tent. Wilson sat up, blinking, and just sat there for a while while the enzymes in his brain failed to catalyze.

Probably because brain activity was more electrical than chemical. Or was that the heart? He really oughta know these things.

Low voices came from outside. He crawled out of the tent. Everyone else was awake, sitting around the fire, and the sun was high.

"Good morning, little egghead man!" Wolfgang said. He picked Wilson up about the waist and set him in his place in the fireplace circle.

He rubbed at his eyes, whimpering despite himself. His whole body was sore, every injured area having stiffened in protest while he slept like a rock. Wolfgang thumped him on the back. The pain of this helped wake him up, at least.

Wes waved to him in greeting. Wilson waved back. "Have you eaten breakfast yet?" he mumbled.

Wes nodded.

"We are sated," Wendy said. "Physically."

"Will make breakfast for tiny man!" Wolfgang began to bustle around by the crock pot.

Wilson wanted to protest, but he also wanted breakfast and didn't particularly feel like cooking it himself. "Thanks," he said instead.

Wes and Wendy watched him expectantly. "I suppose you have our marching orders for the day," Wendy said.

"Hrm, what?"

Wes saluted him.

"Well," Wilson said, rubbing his eyes again, "we need drying racks for all of that meat or it'll go bad..."

"The oracle has spoken," said Wendy. "To arms, Wes." She got to her feet.

"You'll need-

"We'll need rope, coal and twigs."

"Yes, exactly," said Wilson. "Have you made them before?"

"Indeed."

Wolfgang set a steaming plate of eggs and bacon in his lap. "You're too good to me, Wolfgang," he said.

"Is no trouble for friend!"

Wilson poked at the eggs while Wes and Wendy began to twist together handfuls of grass for ropes. He was remembering, now that the fog over his brain was beginning to clear, that he had intended to go investigate the portal, and he would like to go alone, just in case anything happened. The only alternatives to going alone were to either bring someone

vulnerable along, or bring only Wolfgang and leave both of the weaker members of the group in camp unguarded without Wolfgang. Therefore, it was safest to go alone.

He licked bacon grease off his fingers and studied Wolfgang's smiling, mustachioed face. "Er," he said. "There's some business I need to attend to..."

"Wolfgang help!"

"I was gonna go by myself. I mean, you'd be bored, I think..."

Wolfgang studied him. "Business is poop?"

"I-" Wilson felt a blush heat up his face. Oh, what the heck. "Yes. Fine. That's it. Nobody follow me, I'm kind of shy, alright?"

"Oh ho ho! Do not worry. No one wants see that."

Wilson grabbed his backpack.

"Good luck," Wendy said. He scrutinized her face. There seemed to be a hint of amusement in her icy blue eyes. He hadn't pinned her for the type of child to giggle at lavatory humor. Did she know he was lying, maybe?

Unless she made an accusation there was no need to dwell on it. "Yeah," Wilson muttered, and headed off. He could feel that he was still beet red in the face.

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The archway stood just where it always had. Wilson took a deep breath and stuck his arm through it, wiggling his fingers. Nothing happened.

He walked under the arch and around each of the pillars holding it upright. Absolutely nothing changed. He tapped the pillars. The vines twirling about them hissed at him. He stumbled backwards and fell flat on his behind on the ground directly underneath the

archway. His breath caught in his throat in a little yelp and he scrambled out from under the thing's shadow.

His legs were protesting, it took a few minutes to get back up onto his feet. He stood bent over with hands braced against his thighs, wheezing.

He sensed something behind him. Not a sound, more of a... darkening.

Maxwell was standing there. His three-piece suit was noticeably frayed at the cuffs and his comb-over was in terrible disarray. He raised an eyebrow. "Ah. Returned to the scene of the crime," he said.

"You're thriving, I see," said Wilson. He was alive, at least. Wilson had sort of thought he might not be anymore by now.

"And you've come crawling back to me at last..."

Wilson squinted at him. "You know you're the one who abandoned me, right? You took one look at the World's Strongest Man and ran away."

"Ah," said Maxwell. "You believed him, eh?"

What in the world was he getting at? Of course it was unlikely in the extreme that Wolfgang was literally, in point of fact, the strongest man to have ever lived. The fellow was a circus strongman, for Pete's sake! World's Strongest Man was his job title! Was Maxwell really implying that Wilson ought to have heard it and said 'oh now really Wolfgang the strongest? I wasn't born yesterday-'

Ah yes, he'd forgotten; Maxwell had no more manners or charm than a bed-bug. If a child had walked up to Maxwell to show him a crayon drawing Maxwell would probably have said it was out of proportion and burned it.

"There's a sucker born every minute," Wilson said dryly. "Do you want something, pal?"

"Oh, no. Just stopping by to chat."

"Are you sure? You're always welcome back at camp." Where he would coincidentally run into Wolfgang's fists. "You could have a chat with that little girl you kidnapped."

"Ah, hm. Perhaps another time." He turned away. Wilson caught hold of his sleeve.

"Kindly don't rumple my suit," Maxwell asked, and Wilson let go out of a long-ingrained habit of being ingratiating, and Maxwell darted out of reach.

"Hey!" Wilson said. "I don't believe you just happened to be here. What are you looking for?"

"Me? I was revisting the locale for old time's sake, to recall the days before you abandoned me to your new little friends..."

Wilson rolled his eyes and shook his head.

"And now I take my leave," said Maxwell. "And-" He glanced around the area. "I suggest you do the same."

He headed away.

"Now wait a minute!" Wilson tried to follow, but he couldn't quite keep up with Maxwell's long-legged stride and soon lost the old fool among the trees.

Wilson huffed to himself. Something was up or Maxwell wouldn't be here. He'd have to investigate, but right now he should be getting back to camp or the others would worry... plus, he should tell them about Maxwell's recent activities.

He turned to go back towards base and something struck him between the eyes.

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Gaah... darkness and pain... was he dead?

Wilson opened his eyes and saw trees above him. A hard surface was under his back.

He was on the ground, for some reason. And what a headache...

Ah... the portal. He'd yelled at Maxwell and he'd been going home and then he'd been hit in the face by a mysterious force. He must have blacked out...

He tried to move a hand to check his forehead for bruising or blood, and it wouldn't move right. His wrists were stuck together. No- bound together with rope! "Gah!" Maxwell! That buzzard-

A face! "AHA!" it cried.

That was not Maxwell! "Who th'heck are you?!" Wilson tried to get up and merely succeeded in flopping over onto his side. His ankles were tied together too!

Now he had a lovely and informative view of tree trunks- and of mostly-bare feet, grass-stained and bound in cloth, stalking back and forth before him. Definitely not Maxwell!

"I am the warrior of the woods!" a loud, clear voice proclaimed, heavily flavored with an accent he couldn't place. "Wigfrid the shieldmaiden! And now tis I who ask: what manner of creature be you?"

"I'm a human! A human scientist. Who doesn't like being tied up. Please-"

"I saw you conversing with that cur, the magician!" She bent down to peer into his face. "What say you for yourself?"

"I say he's my enemy! A child-kidnapper and a mangy dog!" Wigfrid's manner of speech was slightly contagious. "I was just getting information from him. Untie me, won't

you?" He could not stop himself from tugging uselessly on the restraints, though he knew he would only hurt himself on the rope. His heart beat fast.

"Hmm!" said Wigfrid, pacing back and forth. Wilson writhed himself onto his back and managed to sit up enough to see her madly grinning face. She was red-haired, snub-nosed and freckled, and would, under other circumstances, have been adorable. Now she was terrifying. "I shall have to consult my learned elder."

"Yes, good. Untie me first though." Sweat beaded on his upper lip.

"No need!" She threw him over her shoulder like a sack of potatoes! The bony point of her acromion dug into his belly and he made a sad woosh noise.

"I could walk if you just untied me," he pleaded. "I won't run away. I promise!" If she untied him he would definitely bolt.

"I will untie you when I am certain of your intentions, stranger!" She carried him away, the vibrations of her footsteps pounding through his body.

"My intentions are- to go back to my own camp and- leave yours alone," he said choppily as her gait over the uneven ground shook his body.

"So you say!"

She wasn't being unreasonable, he had to admit- if he'd had the upper hand in this situation he'd likely be doing something similar. It was just a shame he had to suffer, was all...

The ropes chafed his wrists. He bit hard on his lip.

Had to think of something else. She was taking him to see an 'elder'. How many people were here? He dearly hoped the elder would be a sane and logical sort. Oh, and a

real person, and not a tree or something. He had no evidence that Wigfrid was sane- well-apart from her very sane hatred of Maxwell.

In due course he was unceremoniously dumped on the ground, and looked up to find himself-

-deposited not in a little white room, but at the feet of a little old lady.

"My goodness!" she said. "What's this?"

"I've found a stranger in the woods, elder!" Wigfrid declared.

Small children and elderly women, Wilson noted. Next time he saw Maxwell he'd do a lot more than grab his sleeve. "Greetings. I- my name is-" He swallowed. "My name is Wilson Higgsbury, and I'm a scientist. Your, er, friend seems unconvinced of my humanity... I assure you I'm human, I mean you no harm, and I would like to be freed of the ropes now please."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, dear." The old woman smiled down at him. "Now, I just need to make quite certain of your humanity before we let you go. You'll understand that I can't take your word for it."

"Oh. Yes. Sure."

"I've got a bit of cold iron here."

He wouldn't ask where she'd gotten that. "Oh, you think I'm a fairy, do you?"

"Changeling, perhaps. Just hold still, young man."

She pressed the bit of metal to his face. It was indeed cold, and he flinched at the feel of it. He could not have said why this, of all things, but this new oddness was the last bit of sensory overload he could handle. He nearly screamed.

Iron. Fe, from the Latin 'ferrum'. Atomic number 26.

"Hmm," she said, and she took his pulse.

Carbon. C. Atomic number 6. Essential to the molecular composition of living things.

The rope was fraying his skin. Oxygen. O. Atomic number 8. Necessary for breathing. He was sucking in huge draughts of it. Carbon dioxide, one atom carbon, two atoms oxygen. A metabolic byproduct. Discharged with exhalation.

Her fingers finally left his neck. "I'm quite convinced of his humanity, Wigfrid. You may free him now."

"The elder has spoken!" Wigfrid slashed the ropes. "You are now our friend and comrade!"

Wilson sat on the ground, breathing heavily. His skin felt like the film on top of a cold can of Campbell's soup.

He looked about and found that he recognized the meadow they were in, although the tidy little camp that had been set up here was new.

The old lady adjusted her glasses. She looked quite tranquil. "Are you quite all right, dear?"

"Me?..." No. "Yeah..."

"I'm sorry to put you through that, but it was necessary as a precautionary measure. You understand, of course."

"Yes... can't be too careful. Ah..." He scrambled clumsily to his feet. Ergh, his legs had stiffened from inactivity and complained anew at bearing his weight. "I think I ought to be going now. It was a pleasure to meet you..."

"You may call me Ms. Wickerbottom. I believe you ought to stay for at least a moment, Mr. Higgsbury."

"Er, please," he said, "call me Wilson. And I really gotta go now. I'll talk to you later."

"What is so urgent? If you need food, we would be happy to share ours. Wigfrid is an accomplished hunter and we are well stocked with meat. I do hope we haven't hurt or frightened you so badly that you can't bear to speak to us, we certainly never wished to cause you harm. It was only a precaution."

"I understand perfectly, I just have to leave. You see—" He hesitated. While he might understand her use of a 'precaution', he would hate to see the same precaution inflicted upon poor Wendy, and thus he was rather reluctant to tell them that he was in a hurry to get back to check on his camp-mates. "I just have to leave now. I'm a very busy man. I'll speak with you later." He backed away, licking salty sweat off his upper lip.

"Wilson of Higgsbury," Wigfrid declared, getting down upon one knee and striking her chest with her fist- "I have wounded your honor by implying you to be a furred imp in league with the dark warlock Maxwell, and caused you offense. Please accept my apology in meat!"

"You can get up, it's fine! I just—" A distant sound. He stopped talking to listen.

"Perhaps if we engaged each other in just and fair combat—"

"Shh! Do you hear hounds?"

Wigfrid's eyes lit up. "Ah! The children of Fenrir are on the warpath. I shall make up my debt to you in battle!"

"I—" The hounds were coming for the others too then. Including Wendy.

He turned away. Wigfrid's tender ministrations had left rope burns on top of his ankles on top of everything else, and he was a touch dizzy from the blow to his head, and so when he tried to run he fell to one knee.

"Oh, do stay!" Wigfrid implored, hauling him upright. "I shall defend you!"

"You don't understand," he said. He was going to have to tell them. "There are other people at my camp. There's a little kid!"

"A child, dear?" Wickerbottom asked. "Oh my. We will help you defend them. Which way?"

It was a straight shot from here- he pointed east. Wigfrid hauled him up to her back in piggyback position. Now, when Wolfgang picked him up and carried around, it was sort of nice because he trusted Wolfgang, but this lady had just abducted him and everything, so-

She shrieked out a battle cry that rang in his ears and bolted due east. He clung to her for dear life as she bounded over the ground. Wickerbottom was soon left far behind.

The hounds were bounding towards them! "Aah! Put me down!" he cried, but instead of letting him down to fight, she simply whirled like a dervish, with him on her shoulders, and dispatched the hounds- or he thought she did- he was preoccupied with closing his eyes and forcing himself not to be sick. Centrifugal force combined with what was probably a slight concussion from being hit in the head with enough force to cause loss of consciousness. Wonderful.

The hounds must have died, because now she was moving forward again. The hounds had died?! He looked back and saw four corpses lying there before he had to close his eyes again to forestall the motion sickness. Wigfrid had killed them so quickly. Someone with that kind of combat power could, he realized, have done a heck of a lot worse to him than she had, and she had used nonlethal force... so then her actions really had been, without a doubt, purely defensive...

"Aha!" Wigfrid cried. "Your camp!"

She gently set Wilson down on his feet and he immediately sat on the ground.

Wolfgang stood there, looking bemused. Six hound corpses littered the ground at his feet. Wendy and Wes stood behind him, nonplussed.

"Who this?" Wolfgang asked.

"I am Wigfrid the shieldmaiden!"

"She's Wigfrid the shieldmaiden," Wilson said. Wendy's arm was bleeding. He struggled to his feet. "Wes, she's hurt, could you get me the salves, please?" he mumbled, stumbling towards her. He sat next to her in the firepit circle.

Wolfgang and Wigfrid circled each other, sizing each other up. Wilson did not have the mental stamina to pay a whole lot of attention to this.

Wes appeared at his shoulder with the supplies and he began to tend to the bite Wendy had suffered- it did not look terribly serious, at least. Maybe if he'd been there instead of off satisfying his own curiosity, she wouldn't have been bitten at all...

"Will I die?" she asked.

"No! No, definitely not."

"Oh. Darn."

Wigfrid's battle cry sounded. He looked up to see her and Wolfgang rolling on the ground punching each other!

He jumped upright, nearly losing his balance and grabbing the science machine to steady himself. "Hey! Cut that out! What are you doing?!"

They showed no sign of listening to him, and if he tried to get in between them they'd pound him to paste!

"Madness," Wendy observed.

Suddenly, the combatants popped to their feet, all smiles, both of them.

"Truly," said Wigfrid, "you are a mighty opponent!"

"You are stronglady! Worthy to fight Wolfgang!"

"Today we are comrades in arms!"

They clasped each other's hands in what looked to be a handshake that could crush skulls.

"Well, isn't that heartwarming," Wilson said distantly. He sat back down.

"Hello!" Wickerbottom had finally caught up to them and was hurrying into the camp, bright-eyed.

Wendy's eyebrows rose.

"Oh, and there's another one," Wilson said dully.

"Why! I'm so pleased to meet you, dear," Wickerbottom came closer and took Wendy's hands in her own. "What a lovely young lady."

"How do you do," Wendy said, without the lilt that would make it a question, and also without much enthusiasm.

"And what a big strong fellow we have here!" Wickerbottom said to Wolfgang.

Wolfgang showed off his biceps. "I am World's Strongest Man!"

"Oh, my! How statistically improbable!"

"It's his job title," said Wilson.

"And who's this?" Wickerbottom had discovered Wes, who waved exuberantly.

"A mime," said Wilson.

"And a distinguished balloonomancer, I see!" Wickerbottom observed.

Wilson looked at Wes. "What?"

Wigfrid strode forward and put her hands on her hips. "Yes! A good group of allies. I am happy to have met, and I will defend you to the death!"

Aw, look at her. She was a good sort, just a bit... intense, really... she may have made Wilson feel sort of beaten-up and sick but she'd also killed four hounds for him.

Wigfrid was clearly too powerful to want on one's bad side, anyhow. With an effort, Wilson put away the very natural disgruntlement that came with rope burns and a concussion, and walked over to offer Wigfrid his hand to shake. "Welcome to your new home," he said. She moderated her force to shake his hand without pain, which was a relief.

"New friends!" Wolfgang yelled, wrapping both of the women into a large hug.

"Oh my!" said Wickerbottom. But she looked pleased.

Wilson added two logs to the ring of seats around the fire pit.